DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 874 CS 501 324

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TITLE Teaching to Communicate: The Social Psychological Problem.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 18p.; Not available in hard copy to marginal legibility of original document; Study done at the University of Massachusetts

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Behavioral Science Research; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Grade Prediction; *Grading; Higher Education; *Research Methodology; Speech; Theories

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TEACHING TO COMMUNICATE: THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM

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Mr. Conville is assistant professor of Communication Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Appreciation is extended to Richard W. Story, now Assistant Director of Institutional Research, SUNY, College of Arts and and Sciences at Geneseo, for his assistance with the ACE data collection and step-wise regression analysis.

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ABSTRACT

There are 2 problems with the research on the prediction of achievement in applied communication courses: (1) substantial predictor variables have not been isolated; and (2) theoretical explanation of results have not been developed. The present investigation developed an achievement hypothesis based on similarity/attraction theory. It was predicted that instructors would give the better grades to students more similar to them on an Experienced-Inexperienced dimension. The prediction was confirmed for faculty but not for graduate teaching assistants. Application was made to instructor training programs, and social conflict theory was presented as a more useful paradigm than similarity/attraction for future research.

TEACHING TO COMMUNICATE:

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Any discipline that claims the overt change of human behavior to be a major goal of its teaching ought to be able to account for its successes and failures to achieve that goal. Research on the prediction of achievement in applied communication courses indicates that it is not possible for the speech communication profession to account for its results in this regard at the present time. The wide range of teacher and student characteristics studied and the generally small percentages of variance in achievement accounted for in these investigations indicate that it is virtually impossible to predict student performance in the basic applied communication course on the college level.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Kibler, et al investigated 5 language variables as predictors of final grades in an introductory public speaking course.[1] Forty-five students were assigned a 5 minute speech to deliver. The speeches were tape recorded and reduced to manuscript form for the language analyses. The 5 language variables were the Flesch reading ease score, average sentence length (in words), average number of syllables (per 100 words), the Flesch human interest score, and type/token ratio (for the first 500 words in each speech). Multiple regression analysis indicated that 2 measures, average number of syllables and type/token ratio, significantly contributed to final grade prediction. Students who made the better grades used longer words and a more diverse vocabulary. The Flesch reading ease score, though by itself significantly correlated with final grade ($r = -.30$, $p < .05$), did not significantly improve the prediction when number of syllables was also in the regression equation.

The researchers did not note what percentage of the variance in final grades was accounted for by their equation. However, the most variance accounted for by a single variable was 15.21% and that was number of syllables ($r = .39$, $p < .01$).

Judd and Smith found significant correlations between final grades in a fundamentals of speech course and both personality and academic characteristics of students.[2] Using the California Psychological Inventory, their 31 subjects' final grades correlated -.42 ($p < .05$) with flexibility. SAT verbal score and high school rank at graduation by quarter also correlated significantly with final grades, .42 and .24 ($p < .05$) respectively when male and female data were pooled ($n=136$). Students who made the better grades were more inflexible ("deliberate, cautious, worrying, industrious, . . . over deferential to authority, custom and tradition") and had been "good students" in high school. Both the SAT verbal score and the flexibility score accounted for 17.64% of the variance.

Wall has taken a different approach.[3] While continuing to examine the "standard" variables, SAT scores and rank in high school graduating class, he considered specific in-class student behaviors. These behaviors were rated by 87 students' high school teachers on their college applications. The behaviors rated were: participation in discussion, involvement in classroom activities, pursuit of independent study, evenness of performance, critical and questioning attitude, depth of understanding, personal responsibility, and consideration for others. Using simple correlations, only one variable was significantly related to performance in an introductory interpersonal communication course. That was the SAT verbal score, and it correlated significantly with final exam grade ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) but not with final grade ($r = .06$). Using a multiple correlation technique, the highest cor-

relation with final grades was obtained from a combination of SAT verbal score, rank in high school graduating class, and participation in discussion (R= .48), and that accounted for only 23.04% of the variance. Students who made the better grades had been the talkative "good students" in high school.

Working from a sociolinguistic perspective Conville and Story confirmed (1) that high school academic performance was the strongest predictor of final grades in a public speaking course (n= 762), (2) that socioeconomic status played an unexpectedly large part in predicting final grades, and (3) that students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds tended to make the better grades.[4] Of the 4 groups of students studied, in no case was more than half the variance in final grades accounted for. Total variance accounted for ranged from a high of 49.52% for female students in a spring semester (n= 69) to a low of 10.10% for male students in a fall semester (n= 211).[5]

Using a measure other than grades to determine course achievement, Munn and Giffin failed to confirm their prediction that a combination of teachers' maintenance and task behavior will significantly affect student learning in a public speaking course.[6] Student scores (n= 180) on the Patton Speech Content Exam were virtually the same for all 4 combinations of high and low levels of teachers' initiating structure (task behavior) and high and low levels of teachers' expressing concern (maintenance behavior).

What we know then regarding student characteristics predicting high achievement in college applied communication courses is that (1) they use a lot of big words, (2) they use a large vocabulary, (3) they have inflexible personalities, (4) they made good grades in high school, (5) they did well on the SAT, verbal section, (6) they were active participants in high school class discussions, (7) they come from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds, and (8) their high achievement is not dependent on how concerned the teacher

is about them (maintenance behavior) or on the teacher's skills in developing, organizing, and synthesizing the course material (task behavior). Bright, talkative, obedient, well off, and self motivating workers.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Whether these students actually learned anything they didn't already know or would have learned on their own in short order is a question beyond the scope of this paper, but one which should be pursued seriously. Rather, the concerns are that (1) the previous research fails to provide substantial predictors of achievement and (2) the previous research amounts to the accumulation of data without the development of theory. Regarding the first concern, students who are bright, talkative, etc., are doing well in applied communication for reasons other than being bright, talkative, etc. That is, in the studies reviewed above, single variables never accounted for more than 17.64% of variance in achievement, and multiple correlation/regression techniques never accounted for more than 49.52%. Researchers interested in answering the questions raised in this paper apparently have not been looking in the best places for answers. If we are serious about our claims that communication can be taught, then we are obliged to find out what makes that teaching "take" on some students and "miss" others completely. To know the answer to this question would make activities such as writing behavioral objectives or developing simulation/games much more profitable enterprises. We clearly do not have the answer at the present time.

One reason we do not, relates to the second concern with research in this area. It is that there has been minimal effort to develop an explanatory theory of grade achievement in the basic applied communication course. Munn and Giffin's work was set in a humanistic education context. The hypothesis

was that if students experienced warm interpersonal relationships with their instructors, they would do better in the course and consequently perform better on an achievement test. The hypothesis was not confirmed, but certainly merits further investigation. It is certainly an intuitively compelling one.

The second study of applied communication grades to attempt an explicit theoretical stance was that of Conville and Story. Set in a sociolinguistic context, the basic hypothesis was that the more students are similar to the majority/middle class culture, that "runs" the schools, the more likely they are to succeed in applied communication courses. The purpose of this study is to further develop this basic idea of the relationship between student achievement and similarity of students to those who dispense education.

Such a hypothesis finds support not only in sociolinguistics but also in educational research. Getzels, in reviewing the major early works[7] on the relationships between social class and school achievement, indicated that all three cite discrepancy in social class between teacher/system on the one hand and student on the other as a major correlate of student dropout, nonattendance, and failure. For example, commenting on Lynd and Lynd's Middletown: A Study of Contemporary American Culture, he said,

> Another reason [for the strong school achievement-social class relationship] is indirect yet perhaps more potent: the school is dominated by middle-class values of dress, behavior, and associations which tend to suppress the educational aspirations of the lower-class children (pp. 186, 216-217). 8

Regarding Hollingshead's Elmtown's Youth, Getzels concluded:

> Three aspects of the social structure were held responsible for the educational plight of the lower-class adolescent. First, the control of education was in the hands of a board composed only of members

> of the middle and upper classes: "the relationship between the well-being of the community as a whole and the education of approximately four-fifths of the children was not comprehended by the classes the Board members represented" (p. 126). Second, the teachers themselves came from the middle classes, abetting the incongruence between the behavior the children were expected to exhibit in school and the life they actually experienced at home (p. 128). Third, the lower-class parents believed that they were powerless to challenge the position of the "inner ring"; to speak up was to risk reprisal not only upon themselves economically but upon their children in school. 9

The hypothesis that students who are more similar to their instructors will do better in school than those who are less similar also is supported by research in social psychology, specifically in the area of interpersonal attraction and similarity. Byrne has presented evidence to the effect that there is a highly positive relationship between similarity and interpersonal attraction.[10] Fishbein and Ajzen's recent review of the literature in similarity and attraction confirmed this early finding of Byrne's.[11] They reported: "A positive relationship between attraction and similarity of beliefs, values, attitudes, personality characteristics, etc. has been found consistently."[12] This position has been tested with regard to instructional communication. Runkel advanced the general hypothesis that "similarity of structure between two cognitive fields increases the efficacy of communication between them."[13] The hypothesis was confirmed with respect to attitude similarity between college students and their instructors. Students who tended to agree with their instructors on various noncourse social (-psychological) issues also tended to get the better grades. The present study is an investigation of the relationship between instructor-student group membership similarity and student achievement.

Group membership similarity was operationalized as similarity between instructor and students on an Experienced-Inexperienced dimension. Experience

was operationalized in terms of (1) age, (2) marital status, and (3) veteran status. Students who were younger, 17-19, single, and a nonveteran were presumed to be perceived by instructors as relatively inexperienced, while older students, over 21, married, and veterans were presumed to be perceived by instructors as relatively experienced. It was predicted that fulltime faculty would give the better grades to the students more similar to them (older, married, veterans, i.e., Experienced) and that teaching assistants (TAs) would give the better grades to the students more similar to them (younger, single, nonveterans, i.e., Inexperienced).

METHOD

Subjects were students in the applied communication course, General Rhetoric 110 Language and Speaking at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. The course was essentially a public speaking course with about half the grade based on speeches in class and about half based on written assignments and exams. All subjects were freshmen. Instructors were asked to volunteer each student's final course grade. Subjects were identified by student number only. On this voluntary basis, 14 teaching assistant taught sections and 9 faculty taught sections were included in the study. Total subjects were 206. Information on students was obtained by student number from the 1971-72 American Council on Education (ACE) Student Information Questionnaire.

Thirteen variables were examined: Sex (1=m, 0=f), High School Grades (HSGr, 8=A+ and A--1=D), Rank in High School Graduating Class (HSR, 4=top quarter--1=bottom quarter), Need for Tutoring (Tut, 2=none, 1=either English or reading, 0=both English and reading), Father's Education (FEd, 1=grammar school or less--6=post graduate degree), Mother's Education (MEd, same as FEd), Estimated Family Income (EFI, 1=less than $4,000--12=$40,000 or more), Degree Plans (DPl, 1=no degree--5=PhD, EdD, MD, DVM), Age (1=16 or younger--8=26 or

older), Marital Status (MSt, 1=married, 0=not married), Veteran Status (VSt, 1=veteran, 0=nonveteran), Race (1=white, 0=all others; all Ss were white), and Political Beliefs (PBe, 1=far right--5=far left).

The data were analyzed in a stepwise regression with final course grade as criterion variable.

RESULTS

The results of the stepwise regression are presented in Table I. Correlations are included in the table as an aid to interpretation. For example,

TABLE I

a positive correlation between final grades and marital status would indicate that married students tended to get the better grades, and a negative correlation between final grades and sex would indicate that female students tended to get the better grades.

The hypothesis was confirmed for subjects in faculty sections but not for subjects in TA sections. That is, even though the Experienced-Inexperienced dimension entered both regression equations, it accounted for 3 times the variance in grades for faculty sections than for TA sections. The hypothesis was found to be more true for faculty sections than for TA sections. First the faculty data. Although only one Experience variable, marital status, entered the regression equation above the criterion, it accounted for 10.86% of the total variance and 32.14% of the variance accounted for. Further, the correlation indicates that married students tended to get the better grades. By contrast, the TA data indicate that one Experience variable accounted for 3.36% of the total variance and 11.18% of the variance accounted for. The correlation indicates that older students tended to get the better grades.

DISCUSSION

Group membership similarity on the Experienced-Inexperienced dime was only a partial explanation of student grades in this applied commu course. This suggests several interesting directions for future resea First, both the faculty and TA data confirm the well established findi that earlier school achievement is a good predictor of later school ac ment and that females make better grades than males. However, TAs rel a wider range of student variables for grading than did fulltime facul The TAs (apparently) had a repertoire of nine constructs for judging s performance while less than half that number was used by fulltime facul Why this should be so is unclear. A plausible explanation comes from velopmental perspective. What we may have here is a sort of natural hi of teacher development. That is, development of teaching skills, the suggest, may be a dual process of elimination and focusing--eliminating student characteristics by focusing on the higher priority ones. Wheth is so is certainly an answerable question.

If there actually is this natural history of teacher development, training programs at all levels should be aware of it. The implicatio analogous to those of Cronen and Mihevc for the teaching of argument.[14] is, the training goals are redefined. Rather than passing to prospecti teachers information about teaching that they do not presently have, th trainer's task shifts to a higher "level" and it is to teach rules for appropriate application of knowledge trainees already have or can get enough on their own. From this perspective, and specifically applied t ing of applied communication instructors, major tasks of the trainer a to call into question the student characteristics instructors focus on grading (Cronen and Mihevc's 'sorting of premises') and (2) to aid trai

developing principles by which choices among student characteristics may be made (Cronen and Mihevc's 'appropriateness of assessment procedures'). For example, should previous school achievement be as important as it apparently is to achievement in applied communication? If grades in applied communication correlate with greater student "experience," what are the implications of this for the inexperienced student, and what does this tell us about the content of our teaching?

A second fruitful direction for future research is suggested by a social conflict analysis of the applied communication classroom. As Frank laments:

> The near absence of research evidence concerning the effects of interpersonal conflict on learning is a major obstacle to applying social conflict theory to the classroom. [15]

I would like to raise the question whether conflict theory provides a better explanation for the social psychology of the applied communication classroom than does similarity/attraction theory. It is certainly possible to view earlier research in terms of conflict theory. For example, the works of Lynd and Lynd; Warner, Havighurst, and Loeb; and Hollingshead cited above are profitably viewed as investigations of the conflicting value systems of minority/lower class students and majority/middle class teachers and school systems. The greater the discrepancy, the poorer the students' achievement. However, an attraction/similarity perspective holds that the greater the attitude similarity of instructor and students[16] and the greater the group membership similarity of instructor and students (the present investigation) the better grades students make. At present it is difficult to judge which is the more productive point of view.

However, conflict theory applied to the classroom yields some potentially conflicting and testable hypotheses and to that extent may be a more produc-

tive approach. A particularly interesting question is raised in the juxtaposition of two statements by Frank:

> Proposition 3: Social conflict is normally accompanied by a felt or actual discrepancy in the power relations of the parties. [17]

and

> Hypothesis 5: As teacher and student intellectual performance levels and maturational levels approach equality (real or as perceived by students), the probability of teacher-student conflict increases. [18]

In light of these two propositions, how are we to interpret the results of the present study? On the one hand, we may reasonably assume that more experienced students perceive themselves as more powerful than less experienced students. That is, having done many more things in life and having had to cope with a wider variety of circumstances, they are quite likely to view themselves as having more control over their own destiny than less experienced students. From this point of view, experienced students in faculty sections experienced less "discrepancy in the power relations" between themselves and their instructors than did inexperienced students. By way of explanation of the results, inexperienced students experienced greater conflict with their instructors (vis-a-vis power relations), and this accounted for their lower grades in faculty sections. Social conflict then becomes an undesirable state of affairs in the classroom, and instructor training programs based on this explanation would therefore be aimed in part at providing teachers with strategies for conflict prevention, resolution, or management regarding power relations.

On the other hand, based on Frank's "Hypothesis 5," it is possible to argue the opposite explanation for the obtained results: that the presence of social conflict in the classroom (not the absence of it) accounted for the more experienced students making the better grades in the faculty sections.

It is reasonable to assume that the more experienced students perceived themselves as more nearly the maturational equals of the instructor than did the less experienced students. Therefore, it was between instructor and experienced students where conflict was most likely, (rather than between inexperienced students and instructor as above). Social conflict then becomes a desirable state of affairs in the classroom for it apparently accounted for the experienced students making better grades than inexperienced students in faculty sections. Instructor training programs based on this point of view would then concentrate on, among other things, teaching prospective teachers the judicious use of conflict. Whether the obtained results are best explained on the basis of power discrepancy between instructor and students or on the basis of more or less maturational equality between instructor and students is a richly provocative question arising out of a social conflict analysis of the obtained results.

A third useful question for future research to pursue is why the similarity prediction was practically irrelevant to the TA results, and for that matter, why the same can be said for both the alternative social conflict explanations. One possible solution is in the data itself. If in fact the TAs employed more than double the constructs for student evaluation than faculty, it is reasonable that Experience variables could not account for much of the total variance, since they had to share it with six other variables. However, this is not a useful explanation for the one Experience variable which did enter the regression equation as a significant predictor of final grade was Age, and it was the older students, not the younger ones as predicted, who got the better grades. Why the predicted relationship between instructor and student experience did not hold for TAs--whether in terms of similarity/attraction, power discrepancy, or maturational equality--but did hold for faculty remains unanswered.

Finally, left unanswered is which of the two competing perspectives,

similarity/attraction or social conflict, serves as the better base for the further development of knowledge in the social psychology of teaching to communicate.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Robert J. Kibler, Francis J. Kelly, James W. Gibson, and Charles R. Gruner, "Predicting Speech Grades from Selected Spoken Language Variables," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 34 (Winter 1968), 94-99.

[2] Larry R. Judd and Carolyn Smith, "Predicting Success in the Basic College Speech Course," Speech Teacher, 18 (January 1969), 13-17.

[3] K. Wayne Wall, "The Continuing Problem of Predicting Success in the Basic College Speech Course," Speech Teacher, 19 (November 1970), 310-312.

[4] Richard L. Conville and Richard W. Story, "Teaching to Communicate: The Sociolinguistic Problem," Speech Teacher, 20 (November 1972), 247-254.

[5] Conville and Story, p. 252. In Table II multiple Rs were inadvertently entered in the column labeled "Cumulative % Variance." To correct this error, square each entry in the columns so labeled.

[6] Harry E. Munn and Kim Giffin, "Relationships Between Teachers' Task-oriented Behavior, Interpersonal Maintenance Behavior, Student Achievement, and Student Satisfaction," Speech Teacher, 22 (November 1973), 304-309.

[7] R. S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929); W. L. Warner, R. J. Havighurst, and M. B. Loeb, Who Shall be Educated? (New York: Harper, 1944); A. Hollingshead, Elmtown's Youth, (New York: Wiley, 1949).

[8] J. W. Getzels, "A Social Psychology of Education," Handbook of Social Psychology, ed. Gardiner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, 2nd ed. (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1969), V, 472.

TABLE I

STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS*
VARIABLES IN FINAL REGRESSION EQUATION IN ORDER OF ENTRANCE
FINAL COURSE GRADE AS CRITERION VARIABLE

Faculty Sections (n=76)			TA Sections (n=130)		
Variable	Cumulative % Variance	Simple r, Variable By Course Grade	Variable	Cumulative % Variance	Simple r, Variable By Course Grade
HSGr	18.52	.43 higher	HSGr	11.26	.34 higher
MSt	29.38	.26 married	Sex	15.16	-.30 female
Sex	31.98	-.29 female	Age	18.52	.14 older
MEd	33.79	.17 more	HSR	21.68	.27 higher
			FEd	23.97	.08 more
			PBe	25.88	.10 left
			MEd	27.25	-.09 less
			EFI	28.63	.07 more
			Tut	30.05	.11 none

Variable Groups	% of Total Variance	% of Variance Accounted For	Variable Groups	% of Total Variance	% of Variance Accounted For
Experience	10.86	32.14	Experience	3.36	11.18
Other	22.93	67.86	Other	26.69	88.82
Total	33.79	100.00	Total	30.05	100.00

*Variables reported in the table entered the regression equation at or above the low point in standard error; increase in multiple Rs were negligible beyond this criterion point, so the variables may be considered the important or functional predictors of final course grade.